

LINGUISTIC WOKEISM: REVISIONISM OF THE GYPSY MOTH AND ASIAN CARP, AND FATE OF THE RUSSIAN SALAD

Lingvistinis vokeizmas: čigonų drugys ir azijinio karpio revizionizmas bei rusiškos mišrainės likimas

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ABSTRACT

The concept of wokeism in academia might represent two radically ideological poles: neoliberal, it is a symbol of socio-cultural liberation, but conservatively, it is a symbol of unnecessary revisionism that tests the limits of traditional culture. Academia is in the belly of this socio-cultural battle. In this discussion, the term “linguistic wokeism” describes an attempt to correct perceived social inequalities through the medium of language. Two cases are highlighted, the gypsy moth, which was revised to sponge moth (*Lymantria dispar*), and Asian carp, which was revised to invasive carp. It is argued that “linguistic wokeism” is effectively propagated and established when neoliberal ideologies are aligned among academia, socio-political action groups, and neoliberal media, including social media. Finally, in the current ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, early bans on the letters “V” and “Z” in some countries, as a linguistic form of Russophobia, suggests the possibility that geo-political animosities may also be linguistically expressed in neoliberal ways, with a tongue-in-cheek risk being suggested for the Russian salad. The greater risk, in an academic publishing context, if neoliberal revisionist policies are converted into “ethical” policies, is that those who do not agree or align with such policies might be labelled as unethical.

KEYWORDS: media and social media, neoliberal, prejudice, revisionism, socio-political ideologies.

ANOTACIJA

Vokeizmo sąvoka akademinėje bendruomenėje gali reprezentuoti du ideologinius polius: neoliberaliu požiūriu ji yra sociokultūrinio išsilaisvinimo simbolis, o konservatyviu požiūriu – nereikalingo revizionizmo, kuriuo tikrinamos tradicinės kultūros ribos, simbolis. Akademinė bendruomenė yra šios sociokultūrinės kovos

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centre. Šioje diskusijoje sėvoka „lingvistinis vokeizmas“ apibūdina bandymą kalbos priemonėmis ištaisyti suvokiamą socialinę nelygybę. Išskiriami du atvejai: čigonų drugys, kuris buvo pakeistas į kempininę kandį (*Lymantria dispar*), ir azjininis karpis, kuris buvo pakeistas į invazinį karpi. Teigama, kad „kalbinis vokeizmas“ veiksmingai skleidžiamas ir įtvirtinamas, kai neoliberalios ideologijos suderinamos tarp akademinių bendruomenės, socialinių-politinių veiksmų grupių ir neoliberalios žiniasklaidos, iškaitant socialinę žiniasklaidą. Galiausiai vykstančio Rusijos ir Ukrainos karo metu ankstyvi raidžių „V“ ir „Z“ draudimai kai kuriose šalyse, kaip kalbinė rusofobijos forma, leidžia manyti, kad geopolitinis prieššumas taip pat gali būti lingvistiškai išreikštas neoli-beraliais būdais, keliančiais riziką rusiškai mišrainei. Didesnė rizika akademinių leidybos kontekste, jei neoliberali revizionistinė politika paverčiama „etine“ politika, yra ta, kad nesutinkantys su tokia politika ar jai nepritariantys gali būti įvardyti kaip neetiški.

ESMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: žiniasklaida ir socialinės medijos, neoliberalus, išankstinis nusistatymas, revizionizmas, socialinės-politinės ideologijos.

A NOTE ON NEOLIBERAL WOKE CULTURE, AND WOKEISM IN ACADEMIA

Depending on whether a person lies to the far left (neoliberal) or far right (ultraconservative or traditionalist) of the ideological social battle that is spreading around the world, the issue of “woke” may be perceived differently. Using the words of Cowen, wokeism may represent a state of being “highly aware of racism and social injustice, and is galvanized toward raising awareness” for members the extreme far-left, but for members the extreme far-right, it could represent “preachy, alienating, overly concerned with symbols and self-righteous”¹. An online dictionary defines “woke” through a left-leaning prism, as “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)”². The neoliberal academic movement has induced challenges to issues related to cultural ideologies, the economy, society, and “emotional integrity” (Gair et al. 2021).

One tangible outcome of the rise in wokeism as a mainstream socio-cultural phenomenon, and as a buzzword in social media, is that social activism is being transformed into a branding tool for companies, and thus the issue of authenticity of the message may become detracted from its original social intentions (Mirzaei et al. 2022). In their desire to create a new and reformed social fabric, “neoliberal academics embrace a new set of assumptions and norms that stand in sharp relief to many of the values that were previously espoused” (Macfarlane 2021). In extreme cases, in an academic publishing context, should neoliberal ideologies not be embraced, individuals may be socially shamed for not accepting them, or for embracing traditional or conservative values, or they may express unpopular opinions, any or all of which may lead to an attempt to “cancel” them, their voices, and their influence, i.e., cancel culture (Teixeira da Silva, 2021).

¹ Internet Access: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-02-18/wokeism-has-peaked-in-america-but-is-still-globally-influential>.

² Internet Access: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke>.

INTRODUCING “LINGUISTIC WOKEISM”

In this paper, the concept of “linguistic wokeism” is introduced, as a subset of cancel culture, and defined as a neoliberal attempt to correct perceived social inequalities through language. More explicitly, words that might otherwise merely be words, including common or proper nouns, are assigned new and nuanced meanings when placed within a social flashpoint such as race, gender, or culture. In this paper, I focus on two common nouns and one proper noun that are associated with culture. The argument is made that when no narrow or widely conflicting cultural association or perception actually exists, such terms should not be interpreted as “racist”, discriminatory, or otherwise offensive. Common examples with cultural associations, like French fries (fried potatoes), Portuguese man o’ war (*Physalia physalis*), the Mexican wave, or Russian roulette, are established terms in the English language that have not *yet* been subjected to neoliberal protest and reform, or negative socio-political perceptions. In contrast, another part of this argument claims that when feelings of discrimination are involved, these are typically by socio-cultural or racial groups that somehow feel belittled or ultra-sensitized by such nouns, or groups that are perhaps selectively cherry-picked by neoliberal ideologies (or by action groups seeking political or other gains) to meet a “minority” mindset. In these cases, a set of social circumstances are used to amplify a social conflict where one does not exist, inducing an actual state of conflict, one in which such words or terms – that had previously had an innocuous meaning but were purposefully manipulated to give them a negative connotation – may be subject to censorship and radicalized screening. Therefore, it is further argued that “linguistic wokeism” does not occur within a contextual vacuum, but instead requires, and is born from, a strong socio-cultural, linguistic, racial and/or gender-associated impetus in order for it to develop, often amplified by media or social media.

IS THE GYPSY MOTH NOW THE SPONGY MOTH, AND IS THE ASIAN CARP NOW THE INVASIVE CARP?

Individuals may be defined by their cultural groups, and that identity can sometimes be challenged and associated with negative perceptions of, or prejudices about, a particular group or population by other groups or cultures. In some cases, false perceptions may be created in order to purposefully induce a state of social conflict. Such prejudices may become entrenched and negative stigmatization may become amplified if the group is classified as an ethnic minority, such as the Roma or “Gypsy” (Moreira et al. 2022). In the light of this neoliberal ethnic sensitivity, revisionist linguistic policies have now associated the term “gypsy” with a form of prejudice or racism. Consequently, terms that might employ the word “gypsy” may be sociologically and linguistically challenged for reform by neoliberal academics or movements.

As one tangible example, entomologists around the world have known *Lymantria dispar* as the gypsy moth, as its common English name. Despite this, the Entomological Society of America (ESA) took it upon themselves – imposingly overlooking or not

considering the opinions of entomological societies around the world – to revise the common name to “spongy moth” in the Common Names of Insects and Related Organisms List, and sought to implement this change globally by 2023 (ESA 2022). That campaign was aided, among others, by left-leaning neoliberal US media outlets such as CNN and, as revealed at/by CNN, a US-based socio-political pro-Roma action group was linked with this decision³. Why should entomologists around the world – especially those that may write for English academic journals – abide by the decision and rationale of the ESA, and is this a new form of neo-colonial research that has become disguised as a form of “research excellence” (Neylon 2020), in which the value systems of a developed nation (or an organization within it) impose their value system on other less powerful and influential developing nations?

A similar culturally over-sensitive categorization of an invasive fish in the US, the Asian carp, coupled with politicization – or perhaps racialization – of the issue, led lawmakers in Minnesota⁴ to introduce a bill that the Asian carp should be known as invasive carp, with left-leaning news media outlets like CNN⁵ promoting this social reform program with well-established neoliberal “racist” arguments. In this case, the poor fish was in some way made responsible for humans’ conflicting perceptions.

IS THE RUSSIAN SALAD DOOMED?

In the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, in particular by “Western” nations that have been providing military and other support to Ukraine, coupled with economic sanctions against Russia, a negative association became established not only with the country, but also with the word “Russia”. Will neoliberal academics, in this climate, seek to revise terms that include “Russia”? As one example, will neoliberal socio-political revisionists seek to call the Russian salad something else that excludes the term “Russian”? However, what happened with the gypsy moth and Asian carp might serve as indicators of what might befall terms like “Russian salad”, even if the term describes an innocuous food item.

One tactic to reduce Russia’s stature is by deliberately belittling it by referring to it as “russia”⁶, i.e., removing the capitalization of the first letter that typifies proper nouns, as in country names. Another is by banning the letters of the alphabet “V” and “Z”, which have been used symbolically by Russia during this war with Ukraine, while also applying fines and criminal prosecution⁷. However, the latter approach may become untenable, especially if one

³ Internet Access: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/04/world/gypsy-moth-spongy-moth-name-change-scn/index.html>.

⁴ Internet Access: https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=SF2806&version=latest&session=ls88&session_year=2014&session_number=0.

⁵ Internet Access: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/18/us/asian-invasive-carp-rename-scn-trnd/index.html>.

⁶ Internet Access: <https://forbetterscience.com/2022/07/13/germany-s-hitler-cult-thoughts-on-russias-war-on-ukraine/>.

⁷ As examples: Latvia (Internet Access: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/31/latvian-parliament-approves-ban-on-russian-military-symbols-v-and-z>), Estonia (Internet Access: <https://twitter.com/Euromaidan-Press/status/1512996386547060741>), Moldova (Internet Access: <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-4>

considers that another letter “O”⁸, is also used by one Russian battle group, while the V-symbol during photo-ops, especially by high-profile Ukrainian allies, takes on a cringe-worthy irony⁹, while its use by the Israeli IDF on its own tanks in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian war¹⁰, makes banning this letter by Western allies to Israel, or those nations that have rallied against its ban due to Russian use, a conflicting situation. It also seems ironic that, despite the ban of these symbols in Ukraine by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (Ukrainian Parliament)¹¹, that Ukrainian social news media channels used these symbols to refer to the movements of Russian troops¹². Thus, are media and social media accounts that employ these banned letters¹³ also, by association, banned? What would happen if all 26 letters of the English alphabet were to be co-opted into military campaigns, how then should the English language and its alphabet be interpreted? Would language and free communication be banned?

Even if some of these linguistic aspects appear trivial, they collectively become forms of Russophobia (Diesen, 2022), with geo-political ramifications, including attempts to “decolonize” Russia¹⁴.

Those in vehement disagreement with this proposal should reflect on how they might feel if their own nation was referred to, in an act of purposeful linguistic denigration, as “ukraine”, “usa”, “uk”, “japan”, or “germany” to replace and belittle Ukraine, USA, UK, Japan, or Germany, respectively.

THE WIDER RISKS OF NEOLIBERAL REVISIONIST POLICIES

In this paper, it has been argued that wokeism is not merely a social tool for attempting to correct, sometimes in an apparently arbitrary way, an actual or perceived social injustice or prejudice. It has in fact become a powerful socio-political tool, and soft power of social reform, provided that the messaging and reformative objectives of neoliberal academia, socio-political groups, and media are aligned. In the latter case, liberal media, as well as social media (including X hashtags) can serve as messaging platforms to amplify the message. The socio-political struggles of minority groups or populations that have “traditionally” been profiled or otherwise associated with a negative stigma cannot be denied. In such cases, it can be argued

stories/78365/) and Germany (Internet Access: <https://www.jurist.org/news/2022/03/germany-to-criminally-prosecute-individuals-who-display-pro-russia-war-symbol-z/>).

⁸ Internet Access: <https://t.me/RVvoenkor/15752>.

⁹ Internet Access: <https://t.me/truexanewsua/42447>.

¹⁰ Internet Access: <https://socialbites.ca/latest-news/391065.html>.

¹¹ Internet Access: <https://t.me/truexanewsua/41185>; <https://t.me/truexanewsua/47887>; <https://t.me/RVvoenkor/13170>.

¹² Internet Access: <https://t.me/truexanewsua/48880>; <https://t.me/truexanewsua/48925>; <https://t.me/truexanewsua/49159>.

¹³ As one example: Internet Access <https://t.me/s/milinfolive>.

¹⁴ Internet Access: <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/press-and-media/press-releases/decolonization-russia-be-discussed-upcoming>.

that corrective measures are warranted. However, it can also be argued that the correction of history, as well as cultural attitudes and policies, may be excessive if they also involve extreme revisionist policies for words, such as common or proper nouns. This is because the use of such “objects” for political objectification (or de-objectification) may itself pose a deontological problem, i.e., turning an insect or fish into a “tool” or “weapon” to drive larger and more ambitious socio-political ideologies, and thus potential funding for specific action groups with a socio-political agenda. Thus, “linguistic wokeism”, as a neoliberal phenomenon of the weaponization of language, requires greater attention, scrutiny, and debate.

Many academics might not pay close attention to this topic, or they might consider it to be unrelated to their work, or irrelevant. They may even find it to be too politically charged and thus too risky to debate, for fear of peer retaliation. However, they should take notice now before it is too late, i.e., before legal bills and laws are enacted, because there are very practical implications if radical neoliberal policies are not carefully vetted and stopped. For example, if neoliberal policies become excessive, or if they are determined by a minority for the majority, such as ESA’s gypsy moth policy implemented for global entomologists, without any democratic process of choice by the academics or entomological specialists of other nations, then it becomes an extended moral issue associated with authors’ rights, or more accurately, a violation of their rights of choice (Al-Khatib, Teixeira da Silva, 2017). In this case, an artificially created value system is forcefully imposed on entomologists’ rights to name a Gypsy moth as such, including in an academic paper. If the use of such “undesirable” terms becomes outlawed in academia, this will be equated with an ethical issue, and the authors of academic papers might find themselves having to forcefully correct their papers, or if they are resistant to such editorial policies, retract them.

Such cases, which may seemingly be innocuous socio-political ideologies, might become transformed into very powerful pseudo-ethical policies put into practice by journals or publishers with a reformative socio-political ideology. If so, this would ultimately empower some academics, but delegitimize the rights of others. In essence, radical neoliberal policies are playing Russian roulette with value systems in academic publishing, attempting to confound socially sensitive issues with ethics and rights. This topic is rarely, if ever, debated in academic journals.

NEOLIBERAL REVISIONIST POLICIES IN PRACTICE: IS CORRECTION OF THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE WARRANTED?

As one example, and for argument’s sake, as was noted above, the ESA unilaterally implemented a name change for the gypsy moth. However, there are thousands of papers that have, to date, employed the term gypsy moth to describe *L. dispar*, as evidenced in some major databases or search engines like the Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, or Google Scholar. For now, according to their website’s statements, the ESA has attempted to transition global entomologists to – using very emphatic language and promotion via mass media –

adopt sponge moth to replace gypsy moth, which could be considered as the “indoctrination” stage. In this stage, including through the use of liberal and/or social media, society and entomologists around the world are being “conditioned” to accept this neoliberal change as the new accepted “normal”. Thus, by association, they are also – perhaps inadvertently – also accepting its socio-political message, i.e., that the term “gypsy” is prejudicial, and by association, so is the innocent moth. However, this seemingly innocuous stage could be followed by a more impositional (or aggressive) phase of policy creation and implementation.

In that case, the integration of a neoliberal policy becomes more forceful, such as mandating academics who wish to continue referring to *L. dispar* as the gypsy moth to make them adopt, by “force”, the term “sponge moth”, or the Asian carp as invasive carp. How then can enforcement take place? One way would be to introduce “ethical” policies into entomological journals that would state that academics must conform to this term, i.e., a mandatory clause might be inserted into a journal’s ethical policies or instructions for authors. It could receive a stamp of approval by neoliberal globalist ethics policy groups that might support linguistic revisionist ideologies. As was alluded to above, the conditioning stage can also be simultaneously accompanied by a process of social shaming, referring to those who do not adopt newly imposed and supposedly “neutral” terms as racist, intolerant, or unethical, thereby attempting to cancel them – as well as their opinions and choices – in this process. In extreme cases, should, in the future, the ESA mandate the use of “sponge moth” as a journal’s ethical requirement, there may be more serious implications. As one example, ESA (or its proponents) may request authors of papers to retroactively “correct” papers that used the term “gypsy moth” to describe *L. dispar*. At that time, if such policies were to be implemented, at least hypothetically, then current corrective measures for the academic literature (Teixeira da Silva, 2022) may become “weaponized”, and used as socio-political tools of neoliberal reform, through language.

For this reason, academics on both sides of the revisionist argument, as well as those who will surely be impacted by such policies, need to become more proactive and vocal. They also need to exert their rights, and protest decisions that they might not agree with, whether those be conservative or neoliberal. Ultimately, academics need to strive to create a publishing environment that they are comfortable with, that serves the majority while respecting and/or recognizing the minority, and does not serve as another platform to amplify or fortify the objectives of socio-political policies, or the “socially responsible” branding objectives of action groups or corporations, including some publishers.

LIMITATIONS

This potentially polemic essay is not a debate on the ethics of war, so the issue of the historical, political or socio-cultural background of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war are not considered, even though some may argue that it might serve to explain the existence of some forms of Russophobia.

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